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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000037

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM MOPS BM TH

SUBJECT: KNU UNDER INCREASED PRESSURE AS INFLUENCE WANES

REF: A. 08 CHIANG MAI 193 (KNU WILLING TO TALK?)
1B. 08 CHIANG MAI 29 (SPDC BLAMED FOR KNU)

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CLASSIFIED BY: Alex Barrasso, Chief, Pol/Econ, CG Chiang Mai.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary and Comment

11. (C) According to multiple sources, both inside and outside the Thai Government, Thai pressure on the Karen National Union (KNU) to lay low and for its army commanders to relocate to Burma has intensified in recent weeks. Several KNU commanders have departed Thailand's Tak Province for Karen State just across the border. It is unclear whether the current RTG crackdown extends to other Burmese exile groups that use the Thai side of the border as a base of operations. Many of these groups receive funding from the U.S. Separately, exile media outlets reported that a KNU Central Committee member was recently expelled from the KNU for meeting with the head of a pro-regime KNU splinter group.

12. (C) Comment: The latest Thai crackdown on the KNU could be coming from any of a variety of levels. Political: Thailand just hosted the Burmese Prime Minister along with other ASEAN leaders at the ASEAN Summit. Military: Thai Army Commander Anupong Paochinda and Thai Armed Forces Chief Songkitti Jaggabartra recently visited Burma. Local: Township Border Committees meet regularly and can generate get-tough requests from regional Burmese leaders to their local Thai counterparts. Regardless of the source of the increased pressure, the KNU's clout with Thai authorities is a shadow of what it was in the 1970s and 1980s, when the KNU served (with Thai support) as a buffer between the RTG and Burma's military regime. Splits within the KNU, and the passing of charismatic leaders like Bo Mya and Mahn Sha (Ref B and previous), have not helped the KNU's cause. RTG crackdowns on the KNU and other exile groups tend to be episodic and temporary, and usually timed to coincide with official high-level Thai-Burma meetings. However, if the KNU continues to weaken and the RTG's latest crackdown along the border shows staying power, the KNU will find it increasingly difficult to sustain its half-century resistance against the Burmese regime. End Summary and Comment.

KNU Under Pressure, but Is It Alone?

13. (C) According to Royal Thai Army (RTA) and National Intelligence Agency (NIA) contacts in Mae Sot, Tak Province

(just across the border from the town of Myawaddy in Karen State), the RTA command has given orders to clamp down on the KNU, the armed wing of which has fought a low-level conflict against Burma's military regime for over 50 years. The RTA and NIA accounts differ slightly, however, with the NIA asserting that subsequent to a request conveyed by Myawaddy authorities at a recent Township Border Committee meeting, the KNU only needs to vacate its current office space and safe houses and move to new premises on the Thai side of the border. According to a letter sent to the KNU from the RTA, a copy of which we received from a Mae Sot contact, the KNU must relocate to positions across the border in Karen State. This latter account is supported by press reports and two Amcitr NGO activists who have long-standing contacts with the KNU and other Burmese exile groups.

¶4. (C) RTA contacts also told us that during recent encounters between senior Thai and Burmese military officials (likely a reference to Anupong's and Songkitti's recent visits to Burma), Burmese military officers had claimed that the ability of Burmese exile groups to operate freely, particularly in Mae Sot, has a negative impact on Thailand's relations with Burma. According to the RTA, the Burmese handed over images depicting locations used by the KNU and other Burmese exile groups. This account is consistent with a Burmese exile media report that Burmese intelligence officers operating along the border gave Thai authorities a list of addresses known to be used by Burmese groups in Mae Sot.

¶5. (C) According to the NIA, the crackdown extends to other Burmese exile groups in Mae Sot and perhaps elsewhere in Thailand. They too would have to relocate to new premises, though they could remain on the Thai side of the border. We note, however, that to date no group other than the KNU has told us it has been forcibly relocated. On March 13, an exile contact told us that his and other exile groups had temporarily closed their offices. When we last spoke to KNU contacts on

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March 6, they told us they were preparing to move to the Burma side of the border. (Note: The U.S. provides several million dollars of funding to Burmese exile groups located along the Thai-Burma border, mostly through the National Endowment for Democracy, Open Society Institute, and USAID. Many of these groups are based in Mae Sot.)

KNU Defections?

¶6. (C) Separately, the Democratic Voice of Burma reported on March 12 that Nay Soe Mya, a son of late KNU leader Bo Mya, was recently expelled from the KNU. According to the report, he had met with the head of the KNU Peace Council (a pro-regime KNU splinter group) in Rangoon without the permission of the KNU leadership, prompting his expulsion. This comes on the heels of the January arrest by Thai police of Ner Da Mya, one of Bo Mya's other sons, for carrying weapons without a license. According to RTA contacts, Ner Da was summoned to a meeting in Mae Sot by the Thai military, which intentionally engineered his arrest by the police while he was on his way to the encounter.

¶7. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassies Rangoon and Bangkok.
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